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Despite another year of tight governmental budgets, U.S. Rep Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, was optimistic about pending transportation and environmental projects in Lake County as he addressed a summit of mayors from his district Monday morning.

Kirk said that while the current federal fiscal year will be even worse than last year, he is confident that funding will be provided for the long-awaited cleanup of Waukegan Harbor.

"One high-priority area we are going to do is the cleanup of Waukegan Harbor by the Army Corps of Engineers," Kirk said.

Kirk said the completion of that single project will pave the way for the redevelopment of 1,600 acres around the harbor, and the expected economic boom for the city and surrounding area.

"A single appropriations request will fund that," he said.

The cost of completing the cleanup, which includes the removal of PCBs from the harbor, has been estimated to range between \$9 million and \$20 million.

Kirk said he expects the appropriation to be approved this year, and the work to be done next year. He said negotiations continue regarding the destination of harbor pollutants.

On the traffic front, Kirk said Lake County would soon benefit from two federally-funded projects — the double-tracking of Metra's North Central Line from Antioch to Chicago and the opening of a traffic control center in Libertyville to manage many of the county's important intersections.

"We have funded that for approximately \$3 million, and we'll be breaking ground this spring," Kirk said of the traffic control center, which will be operated by the Lake County Division of Transportation.

Tapping into a network of fiber optic lines connecting many of the county's busiest intersections, controllers at the traffic center will be able to help manage traffic and respond to emergencies.

Kirk said the center "allows you to do all the basics," including adjusting lights to address the time of day, weather and traffic accidents.

"You can clear a path of green lights for emergency vehicles," he said. "This will allow Lake County to have not only control of the lights, but a camera in the intersections."

Kirk also said that next year the North Central line will be running a full-service schedule of 16 trains to serve commuters, thanks to a double-tracking project primarily funded through \$52 million in federal appropriations.

On the environment, Kirk said he wants to continue working for more strict federal pollution control requirements for coal-burning plants, which he said are responsible for rising levels of mercury in Lake Michigan and can pose a threat, especially to children and pregnant women. He said that due to prevailing wind patterns, coal-burning plants from California to Waukegan contribute to mercury pollution in the Great Lakes and oceans.

Finally, Kirk announced that an area of pristine bluffs along the lake at Fort Sheridan may be designated a migratory bird sanctuary and protected from development.

Kirk said the Navy has tentatively signed off on the concept of preserving the bluffs area, which is not protected as part of the Lake County Forest Preserve District's Fort Sheridan Preserve. He said the area is a stop-off point for several threatened and endangered species.